

# Research reveals what college students mean when they say they're 'just talking'

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What do college students mean when they say they're "just talking?" According to new research from Binghamton University, State University of New York, it's not about hooking up -- it's about getting to know each other. Credit: Binghamton University, State University of New York

"Are you two dating?"

"No, we're just talking."

It's a common phrase used by college students to describe a type of relationship, but what exactly does "just talking" mean? Does it mean the same thing as "hooking up?"

According to new research from Binghamton University, State University of New York, "just talking" allows college students to build intimacy in an environment where openly seeking [emotional connection](#) and [romantic relationships](#) is stigmatized. It's not a hookup – it's about getting to know each other.

The paper, ["What Are College Students Talking About When They Say They're 'Just Talking?'"](#), was published in *Emerging Adulthood*.

"Nearly everybody is familiar with the phrase 'just talking,'" said Melissa Hardesty, co-investigator at Binghamton University's Human Sexualities Lab. "Some of the common themes are that 'just talking' is 'a label without a label,' it's 'not exclusive,' and it's a way of getting to know somebody, possibly for the purpose of starting a relationship or, conversely, for the purpose of avoiding a relationship while still engaging in relationship-like activities."

The study reveals that romantic relationships may be more important to [college students](#) than what people may assume, said Hardesty.

"I do think romance is more important to emerging adults than people may think," Hardesty said. "My guess is that romance never went away, but the dominant college culture is centered around drinking alcohol and finding sexual partners. My best guess is that a cultural shift has been in the works for some time, but [social scientists](#) don't usually detect these things until they're well underway."

To investigate exactly what "just talking" means, Hardesty and researchers at the Human Sexualities Lab conducted a survey of 403 undergraduate students. They asked about the purpose of "just talking," how it's used to describe interactions, and the ways in which people who are "just talking" communicate.

The results allowed the researchers to identify broad themes. For example, more than 100 responses mentioned physical intimacy. Many responses indicated it is a way to describe relationships that could lead to commitment but don't yet have this expectation. And the vast majority of responses indicated that people who are just talking communicate via smartphones and social media.

To get a better understanding of the term, the research team designed a set of focus groups, asking about the meaning of "just talking," how students meet the people with whom they talk, the role of sex and emotions, and what traits they look for in a "just talking" partner. Two of the major themes revealed were that 1) "just talking" is about getting to know each other and building intimacy and 2) it's not a hookup.

"In hookup culture, emotional attachments are taboo (though they do occur); just talking allows students to form emotional intimacy while downplaying the significance of such intimacy – they're 'just' talking," said Hardesty.

"It's striking to me that students have difficulty recognizing courtship, which is a process rather than a status. I think this may be because a sex and gender-integrated [social environment](#) allows people to meet potential partners without a formal courtship strategy in place. Students almost certainly courted one another outside of hookup culture prior to the emergence of 'just talking', but there didn't seem to be a dominant/recognizable strategy."

The lab is currently conducting interviews with people who are "just talking" to better understand how this process plays out over time and how people make sense of these experiences.

The research team included Associate Professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Sean Massey, Psychology Instructor Ann Merriwther, Assistant Professor of Social Work Sarah Young; along with former students Sayre E. Wilson and Leora Wasserman.

**More information:** Melissa Hardesty et al, What Are College Students Talking About When They Say They're "Just Talking?", *Emerging Adulthood* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/21676968241234398](https://doi.org/10.1177/21676968241234398)

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